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SUBJECT: MORE TIME NEEDED TO REOPEN GEORGIA-RUSSIA AIR LINKS

¶1. Georgian Airways announced on July 1 that it is about to start periodic charter flights to Moscow, beginning July 3. The company's press release indicated that this is a temporary arrangement between the company and Russia's transport administration, facilitated by Georgia's Orthodox Church Patriarch. Georgian Airways said that the charter flights do not imply a resumption of the scheduled air traffic with Georgia that was suspended by Russia on October 3, 2006 after the arrest of Russian military spies in Tbilisi.

¶2. The press characterized the move as evidence of melting ice between Russia and Georgia. Since October last year Georgian travelers have been using Kiev or Yerevan as stopovers for accessing Russia, thus paying higher airfare than before. Unfortunately, on June 2 Georgian Airways announced that the Russian side has not yet sent a note to the Georgian United Transport Administration (UTA) to confirm that a flight permit has been issued to the Georgian air carrier. In a conversation with us, the head of the UTA, Irakli Taktakishvili, could not hide his irritation about Georgian Airways' premature statement trumpeting its success before receiving the necessary confirmations.

¶3. Georgian Airways itself is puzzled by the delay, as concrete reasons are not known to them either. Vice-president of the company, Roland Beridze confirmed that preliminary agreement on charter flights was achieved with Russia's transport authorities and the date was agreed. Beridze suspects the delay might be caused by Russia's desire that the Georgians permit similar flights for Russia's Aeroflot as well. He assured us that Georgian Airways would not have any objection to Aeroflot flights.

TEFFT